

## Police take back Spanish Town - Murders down, gangs in retreat

**Residents happy, want police to stay in Spanish Town communities**

BY KARYL WALKER Editor — Crime/Court Desk [walker@jamaicaobserver.com](mailto:walker@jamaicaobserver.com)  
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Standing guard in Gravel Heights.



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THE police force's relentless pushback against the two violent criminal gangs that for years turned Spanish Town and its environs into killing fields is finally reaping dividends, as murders and shootings there have dropped significantly over the last two years.

According to police data, 115 murders were reported in the St Catherine North Division in 2012, compared to 174 the previous year. Shootings numbered 118 last year, compared to 178 in 2011.

Even more encouraging for the police and residents of the old capital and its neighbouring communities is word from Superintendent Anthony Castelle that the gangsters are now on the retreat because of police strategies that have been implemented over the last 12 months.

"We are using all the resources at our disposal and we will not wait until a crime is committed before we act," Castelle told the Jamaica Observer during a tour last week of some of the communities that were, in the past, most prone to violence and criminality.

"The murder rate in the division has been significantly reduced. Extortion used to cripple businesses, but that has significantly been minimised. The illegal transport centre has been down for almost two years and will not be back up in operation. The criminals have been forced to leave the area and we are actively pursuing migrating criminals," Superintendent Castelle stated firmly.

His major challenges now remain robberies, break-ins, rape, and carnal abuse, which have all seen increases in 2012.

Over the last two decades, hundreds of persons have been killed by criminals in Spanish Town. So bad was the violence that police sources said members of the top brass were reluctant to be assigned to the division.

Multiple murders — including beheadings — shootings, extortion, and mayhem made residents fearful. Many days, business operators were forced to pull down their shutters prematurely as gunmen from the two notorious criminal outfits — the One Order and Klansman gangs — and later the Unity Gang, traded bullets.

The "illegal transport centre" to which Castelle referred was once the source of deadly battles between the One Order and Klansman gangs over extortion rights.

Oxford Road in the town is regarded as a borderline between Klansman operatives from Railway Lane and One Order gangsters from Ellerslie Pen.

For years, both sides would launch attacks on each other, even in broad daylight. But in the last year, no such attacks have been carried out, as the police have implemented what they have termed a 'static patrol' – an armoured personnel carrier and a police car permanently posted — on the borderline.

"We have posted police at critical points and it has reaped positive results. There has been a significant reduction in violent crimes in this area," Castelle said.

Other areas where cops are permanently posted to ensure that criminals are kept at bay include Twickenham Park Road in the vicinity of Greendale; Shelter Rock; Thompson Pen, a bustling community where drive-by shootings and armed robberies were commonplace; the Spanish Town Hospital; and Lakes Pen, where residents have been the victims of gun violence because of their opposition to the Klansman gang.

"There have been no robberies at Greendale, and the Lakes Pen area has been peaceful since we have occupied those areas," Castelle said.

But perhaps the most effective move by the police has been made in the once-troubled neighbourhoods of Gravel Heights and Tredegar Park.

In August 2010, about 20 heavily armed gunmen invaded a section of Tredegar Park and slaughtered eight persons, including 11-year-old Alexifia Anderson.

The other victims were Alexifia's mother Hopelin Dennis, 43; her sister Nekfifa Anderson, 23; and her brother Joel Anderson.

The others, who were killed on separate premises, were Eldon Heron, 60; his son, Eldon Heron Jnr, 38; Gary Stewart, 22; and Orrett Miller, 26. Another man, who was also shot, was hospitalised in serious condition.

Hours after the massacre, two of the suspected gunmen were cut down in a shoot-out with police.

The residents of Gravel Heights were not without their share of misery as police reported that two double murders per week was the norm for that community.

Both communities were the stomping grounds for the Klansman Gang, but since the police intervention, the only disturbances in that section of Spanish Town have been domestic disputes.

Police posts have been set up in both communities and the results, the constabulary said, are positive.

In Gravel Heights, the police post has been set up at the pinnacle of a hill that was once occupied by gunmen. Now, that spot gives the cops a vantage point to view the entire community and keep criminals at bay.

"This was where the bad men used to be. Whenever a police vehicle was entering the community they could see from the top of the hill and escape. We have taken over this spot, and since then the criminals have fled the community. Now, the law-abiding citizens can go about their daily business in peace and the children can come out to play," Castelle said.

The residents, of course, are happy.

"We don't want them to leave. We want the police to stay right here. I can sleep comfortable, walk in peace, and set up my little shop," one woman, who asked not be named, said.

Orville Reid also lives in Gravel Heights and was not afraid to share that sentiment publicly.

"Life is 100 per cent better since the police have come here. We don't want them to leave," he said.

However, the police post in Gravel Heights has no bathroom. Therefore, the cops who occupy it are forced to use the bushes or ask residents to allow them to use their facilities.

To counter that, the residents have offered to provide the labour to construct a bathroom for the cops, and Reid was upset that everything was not in place as yet.

"The man dem need a bathroom, Mr Castelle," he told the superintendent sternly during last week's tour. "We will build it, but dem need it, because especially at night dem can't be walking and asking to use bathroom."

Castelle, acknowledging and appreciating the residents' concern for the welfare of the cops under his command, informed Reid that the situation would be resolved sooner than later.

In addition to setting up a police post, the police have also cut a road to give them easier access to the community and are moving to set up a homework centre for the children of Gravel Heights. Community meetings are also a regular feature of the police initiative to restore

normality to the community, which still bears the scars of gang violence.

Residents who had fled the community because of the violence have returned, as the police have flushed out gangsters who had captured the empty houses.

A similar situation exists in Tredegar Park. When the Sunday Observer arrived there, a relative of three of the victims of the massacre was seen cleaning an area where a mobile police unit was set up.

"It's a blessing. God bless the police. We are able to breathe," he said.

Constable Richard Brown is one of the cops whose duty it is to maintain law and order in Tredegar Park. He indicated that he was very comfortable working there as the threat of criminality is low.

"It is mostly domestic disputes. They accept us pretty well and the people who had moved out have come back," Brown said.

Last Wednesday, two men — Tyrone Herron, 18, of Tredegar Park and Seon Taylor, 20, of Beacon Hill — were fatally shot by cops in the community. Police report that the men were cut down during an armed confrontation. A police source said Herron and Taylor were suspected extortionists who were terrorising a worksite in the area.

"Even though we are dedicated to community policing we will use deadly force if we are confronted by any bad men who point their weapons at us. Let this be a lesson to the criminals that there is no safe haven in Tredegar Park," the police source said.

In recent times, the One Order Gang has been imploding and several murders at St John's Road and Angels in the parish have been attributed to the internal conflict.

The Tawes Pen and Ellerslie Pen communities have long been regarded as the headquarters of the gang, and in order to stem the violence the police recently conducted two raids and took dozens of suspects into custody.

"We have carried out our risk assessment and we will be taking every step to keep the violence in check," Castelle said.

Several of those taken in by the cops are still behind bars.

According to Castelle, the Spanish Town police have been assisted by other colleagues in Area Five, the Mobile Reserve, the Flying Squad, the St Catherine South Police, and the St Catherine Major Investigation Task Force, which have put together solid cases to secure murder convictions.

The results of the police strategies have so buoyed Superintendent Castelle that he is predicting a return of tourism to Spanish Town, home to historic buildings and the old iron bridge, built in 1801 and regarded as one of oldest of its kind in the western hemisphere.

"Tourist buses are already coming back, and in time more will be here, especially with the North/South highway coming on stream soon," he said in reference to the major road project that will reduce travel time between Kingston and the north coast.

Other initiatives that have been implemented by the police to curb criminality in the old capital are:

- \* Work in collaboration with Spanish Town Mayor Norman Scott, the business community and other stakeholders to establish a Community Safety and Security Initiative;
- \* Clearing of thick vegetation once used for cover and as escape routes by criminals in the New Nursery, St John's Heights, Lakes Pen, Spanish Town bypass, sections of the banks of the Rio Cobre, and other areas;
- \* Toppled or painted over murals of slain dons and bad men in several communities;
- \* Work alongside the Island Special Constabulary Force to curtail illegal sand mining along the banks of the Rio Cobre; and
- \* Permanent highway patrols from Flat Bridge to the roundabout at Jose Marti High School.